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A NEW LOOK AT THE STRUCTURE OF MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIETY

BY

A. LEO OPPENHEIM

The mood of reflection and reconsideration in this article stems from the conclusion of a prolonged investigation of the cuneiform tablets found on the site of the Old Babylonian city of Sippar, a research project entitled "Urban Society, Economy and Demography in Ancient Northern Babylonia," undertaken by Dr. Rivkah Harris under the supervision of Dr. Robert M. Adams and me, and supported by the National Science Foundation.

This pioneering investigation of the legal and administrative texts from Sippar was aimed at obtaining a closer look at all aspects of social and economic life in one Mesopotamian city for which there is available a great amount of direct documentation (about 1,600 tablets) for the relatively short period of three hundred years (ca. 1894-1595 B.C.). The results of this research, to be published by Dr. Harris, provide some insight into the social structure of the city of Sippar; to mention a few instances: we now see more clearly the mechanics of the city administration, the relationship of the citizens to the surrounding countryside, and the relationship between Sippar and Babylon, seat of the central administration of the empire. My personal mood of reflection and uneasiness comes from the realization that, even though restricted to such a short and relatively well attested period, an investigation of the kind inaugurated by the "Sippar Project" is not likely to illuminate satisfactorily the structure of Mesopotamian society.

For this reason I have permitted myself to muse here over the nature of the textual evidence from Mesopotamia on which such an investigation must necessarily rely.

There are two possible approaches to the relevant cuneiform documentation: one that produces a wide range of specific data which can readily be classified and presented, and one that utilizes bits of acci-

dental and mostly indirect information, gleaned from difficult, often obscure, contexts, yielding in the end an admittedly conjectural picture. Scholars who choose the first concern themselves mainly with segments of the Mesopotamian society that consist of persons characterized in the texts as being other than free. The cuneiform tablets from the earliest periods onward deal with such persons, either in groups and teams or individually identified by a number of special designations. The second, and more difficult, approach aims at investigating that stratum of the population to which belong those who are neither slaves nor members of the extensive household organizations of temple and palace, who are neither confined to specified manual activities nor subject to legal, residential, or other restrictions.

I realize, of course, that the nature of the textual evidence favors the first of the two alternatives here characterized. Administrative documents offer abundant evidence concerning persons with restricted freedom, while information about "free" persons is given only rarely and most often in uncharacteristic contexts. Why is it so difficult to learn from our documents about free men? The answer is that in the main cuneiform tablets have been written not to inform but to record for purely internal use. Although all sorts of factual evidence abound, it is curiously and obstinately resistant to our probing beyond these outlined limitations. Greek authors write primarily for or against something; they reason with their readers to win them over to their own point of view. When they write, let us say, about the city, its government, etc., they do it from a partisan's angle and this endows their writings with verve and persuasiveness, with love and hatred, through which not only the personality of the authors but also the conflicts and problems of their world emerge with a directness that touches us even today. Cuneiform texts, however, were written not by "authors" but by scribes, members of a class of well trained specialists who were bound by traditional models which permitted little deviation in what was to be written on that piece of clay and in what form this was to be done, under the given circumstances. No attempt was ever made to describe objectively the pattern in which public and

private affairs were enacted. This lack of interest in rendering the reality of a specific situation, in reproducing the immediacy of a happening, stands in curious contrast to the importance assigned to detailed and lengthy description in the literary tradition of Mesopotamia. Yet, even in the realm of literary creativeness, descriptions tend to be concerned solely with the "surface" or obvious features of reality. How pale, abstract and de-personalized is Gilgāmesh (who can touch us only as an "Everyman") compared with a unique figure like Odysseus; not one Assyrian king actually rises out of the countless lines of the inscriptions written on his behalf and for his glorification as vividly and convincingly as does David out of a few chapters in the Book of Samuel; the cuneiform texts give us no close-up of actual life in town and country that can be compared to Homer's description of war and peace depicted on the shield of Achilles, no pageant as colorful and subtle as the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*; no historical or even pseudo-historical anecdote is ever told to pinpoint a decisive turn of events or to highlight a person as a part of historical perspective.

Another obstacle we face in a search for the structure of Mesopotamian society is this civilization's acceptance of the gap that separates the ideal from the real in all facets of social and political life. Matter-of-fact admission of contradictions between any number of political, social, legal, and economic statements contained in the formal utterances of kings and the actual state of affairs as well known to all participants and observers abound in the records. Such an attitude extinguishes social criticism and any interest in reform beyond the necessary relief from temporary or local maladjustments. There is no place in administrative circles for the activist attitude or for the positive obligation on the part of public servants toward society as it is expressed in Chinese Confucianism; we discover no quest for the perfect operational model that would make society "work," and in which the socially oriented Greek philosophers were so interested, no attempt to mold man's attitude toward man by means of dramatic encroachments of the sacred into the profane life (such as theophany, prophecy, etc.) as in the Old Testament and its subsequent reflections.

These restrictions determine the nature of the evidence available to Assyriologists—whether or not my characterizations of the underlying causes be valid for other scholars—and channel attention to those numerous records dealing with persons who are other than free. They are full of information about the several designations of these persons, about their manifold activities as well as about their relationship to the authorities, the obligations imposed on them, the compensations granted, etc. From the very dawn of writing in wedge-shaped signs on clay to the disappearance of this technique, such evidence is plentiful, in fact, overwhelming in quantity and variety. These lists of rations, of deliveries of staples, of expenditures are, moreover, recorded with a minimum of wording, with formulaic conciseness so that the patience of the collector can effectively supplement philological understanding, since it matters little if at all whether the texts are in Sumerian or Akkadian. To boot, these documents furnish a welcome subject of study to Orientalists of “Marxistic” denomination who, a long time ago, seized upon the *ratio essendi* handed them and have been busily working in a field of research that enables them to express their concern for the exploitation of man by man, their sympathy for the underprivileged.

To search the cuneiform sources for evidence bearing on the role of the free man may admittedly prove an impossible task, but I think that the attempt must be made if one is seriously to investigate the structure of the entire Mesopotamian society and not to content oneself with a mere segment of it. I maintain that no amount of detailed knowledge of the workings of the Mesopotamian ration system, of the agricultural activities of the household organizations and their serfs, of the craftsmen producing tools and goods, even of the bureaucratic apparatus which controls the mechanics of these organizations, will or can shed light on that section of the population which carries the burden of the civilization and ensures its continued vitality. There is no need here to elaborate upon the obvious parallels from dead and living civilizations to demonstrate that disenfranchised segments of the population may be economically essential but that they neither

determine direction or mood nor establish that civilization's individuality.

What manner of texts, then, could, at least theoretically, help us in that quest? Laws, legal documents, and other documents that illuminate relations and conflicts between private individuals yield little factual information and are devoid of statements of principle. Historiographic texts and royal pronouncements may prove fertile if one not only scrutinizes them for veracity and validity but also perceptively sifts them for allusions to the conflicts of the period. Omen texts can prove rather enlightening because their repertory of expectations and apprehensions reveals, at times, some degree of social mobility and economic instability within the ranks of free men, as well as conflicts between the latter and the royal administration which are absent in other kinds of text material. Were it not for their elusiveness and the fact that they are by nature deeply embedded in strictly circumscribed social contexts, proverbs could offer a mine of information on the subject at hand. This genre is among the earliest written on clay and is the section of cuneiform literature that is most likely to reflect life as actually lived in Mesopotamia.

In the present paper I would like to investigate the position of the free citizens in a Babylonian city as evidenced by material collected for the Sippar Project, and see what conclusions can be reached on this basis for the understanding of the social structure of Mesopotamia, at least of that period. My specific point of departure in this paper is an assembly of data singled out from the Sippar texts by Mrs. Harris. I shall not deal here with the textual basis for these data nor shall I discuss the methods applied to them, but I shall restrict myself to stating the facts these data attest and shall use these facts for my personal interpretation.

The highest civic office in the city of Sippar is designated by a variety of titles that change during the period under study because of shifts within the city administration, the causes of which are not apparent to us. The best attested official in that position is the UGULA DAM. KÀR.MEŠ, i.e., "overseer of the merchants." He appears regularly

in the address of royal letters sent to the city of Sippar in the formula: "To PN, the overseer of the merchants, and to the 'judges' of Sippar." These letters from the kings of the Hammurapi dynasty (up to Samsu-ditana) concern urban affairs such as taxes, rebuilding of canals, repairs of the city walls, the communal granary, etc., and are obviously directed to the two authorities in charge of the city of Sippar as such, consisting of the "harbor" and the walled urban agglomeration, with the "harbor" and its head clearly in dominant position. All references in which the official called UGULA DAM.KĀR.MEŠ occurs have shown that the tenure of this office is strictly annual and, although the same person may serve a second or third term, these terms are never successive.¹⁾ The files of the Sippar Project show furthermore that these "mayors" (if for the sake of convenience one may apply such an alien term) came from well-known Sippar families and were quite wealthy. I propose to see in this state of affairs a direct reflection of a civic institution which regulates the term of office of the head of the city government in the following way: from a small group of individuals of wealth and status one person is selected by lot to serve for an annual tenure with the proviso that the retiring official cannot participate in the selection of his successor²⁾. This indicates the existence, within the city of Sippar, of a civic tradition that implied a degree of personal equality—at least among a restricted circle of citizens—as well as of the basic concept of home rule or, to be more specific, municipal autonomy.

The phenomenon here outlined is admittedly only a reflection of the power structure at the top of the local government in the city of Sippar and is quite unlikely to be characteristic of the entire city administration—from what we know from the Sippar material. Yet, the very fact that executive power was not held for reasons of personal status or royal appointment, but rotated among peers, remains an

1) The other designations are: *rabiānum*, GAL UNKIN and *šāpiru*. Since officials bearing these designations are attested only sporadically, they cannot contribute any positive evidence in favor of the statements made in this paper. Still, none of the occurrences contradicts them.

2) The same operational method was applied to determine the sequence of the Assyrian *līmu* officials, see simply my *Ancient Mesopotamia* p. 99.

outstanding feature of Mesopotamian urbanism. I propose to relate it here with other features known from certain contemporary documents and even better attested in the first millennium B.C. These are the urban privileges which imply, speaking quite generally, exemption from military and corvee services, tax and specific judiciary advantages. These civic prerogatives, though they seem to have been restricted (perhaps only after the Dark Age) to such old and famous cities as Sippar, Nippur and Babylon, represent a syndrome within the social structure of Mesopotamia from which the above described municipal autonomy of Sippar (and, presumably, of other important cities) in the Hammurapi period cannot and must not be separated.

Let me counter at this point two obvious objections which can be made against this proposition: first, that the UGULA DAM.KÀR.MEŠ is only the head of the merchants' gremium and not the "mayor" of Sippar, and, second, that what can be ascertained for Sippar does not necessarily apply to other cities of the period. With regard to the first objection, it can be stated that the tenor and purpose of the royal letters definitely show the person who is the head of the association of merchants as exercising, in Sippar at least, the functions of a "mayor," i.e., that he represents the community in dealing with the central authority. He is definitely not a royal appointee like the *haṣannu* who is appointed by the king for longer periods and seems to have been put—as a police officer—in charge of the city's wards. The very restriction in the term of office of the "overseer of the merchants" attests unequivocally to both municipal autonomy and equality of status (see below). The objection that the situation in Sippar might not be typical is more difficult to refute simply because material from other cities of the period either is lacking or too scanty or has not been systematically investigated. Nevertheless, since "harbor" settlements are attested by documents from Ur, Uruk, Larsa, Nippur, Babylon, to mention only the most outstanding cities, there seems no cogent reason to assume that the situation in Sippar was unique. Although I am ready to admit the existence and the importance of variations in the political structure of individual urban settlements in Mesopotamia,

I contend that the basic assembly of social attitudes here outlined was present and functioning to some extent in every major city in Mesopotamia known to have been an emporium (Sippar, Nippur and Ur). To a lesser degree, this might have been the case in what could be called "royal" cities, harboring a king, his administration and the barracks of his army. The state of affairs in the "temple"-dominated cities cannot be established. We have to realize that the political situation involving royal residence, temple complex and the merchant settlement attached to the walled city necessarily varied from city to city and, possibly, also shifted in the course of time.

We have, however, not yet attempted any systematic investigation of the texts from other cities than Sippar and we do not even know whether another such opportunity, i.e., texts of sufficient variety and density of coverage, is available for such an undertaking. In spite of this handicap, I propose to compare the few but decisive characteristics of Mesopotamian cities pointed out in this paper with certain features of the cities of other civilizations. If enough differentiations can be established, these might, conceivably, suggest the nature of some of the pressures that influenced and even shaped the development of Mesopotamian urbanism.

The cities of the West, those of Greece and Rome on one hand and of medieval Europe on the other, are best suited for such a comparison. The cities to the east of Mesopotamia have not been considered; I am not sufficiently familiar with their origins and development to rely on even secondary sources, while the cities of the Islamic world represent, in my opinion, the very interesting example of a skeuomorphic development in which the emerging Islamic states (of the first millennium A.D.) grew into the pattern set by previously established traditions of city living and city building.

The scantiness and onesidedness of the Mesopotamian evidence suggest the use of negatively formulated definitions of what I consider the essential and unique features of a Mesopotamian city. Let me state a number of points which are more or less subjectively arranged according to whatever appears to me, at this writing, especially note-

worthy or revealing. For brevity's sake, these points are given without the appropriate cautelary clauses and the customary "scholarly" hedging.

1. The Mesopotamian city is a community without the economic and social cleavages¹⁾ and tensions created in the Western cities of Antiquity and the European Middle Ages by the clash between what are termed *eupatrides* and *demos*, patricians and *plebs*, *signoria* and *popolo*. Out of such conflicts grew, as is well known, not only self-rule and democracy (whatever that term may have meant at any given moment and place) but also tyrannies, revolutions, and counter-revolutions.

2. The Mesopotamian city, in contrast to the cities of the West, is not a defense community; that is, it does not establish a militia whose members are under specific obligations to and derive special privileges from this basic social situation. On the contrary, freedom from military service always constitutes the primary goal of a Mesopotamian city's political ambition.

3. The Mesopotamian urbanites neither profess interest in written laws nor ask for their promulgation—demands which stimulated and produced the law codifications of Antiquity—because the unwritten, traditional law inevitably favors the upper class, the landlords. In Mesopotamia, the promulgation of written laws was an important function of the king, an expression of his social concern, whether these laws were actually applied or represented only a socio-political programme.

4. The Mesopotamian city is a city without a center or a focal point. No *agora*, *forum*, marketplace or city hall²⁾ provides the city dwellers

1) The role and position of the *muškēnu* is still not quite clear although von Soden has shown convincingly in ZA 56 133 ff. ("*muškēnum und die Mawālī des frühen Islam*") that the designation does not refer to a "class of persons."

2) The term *bīt āli* in the Middle Assyrian expression *aban bīt āli* "stone weight of the city house" (see CAD s.v.) would seem to suppose an institution in Assur where standards for weight were kept for public control. Note also the Old Assyrian *aban mātīm* and certain local weighing standards in the Old Babylonian period (CAD *abnu* mng. 4d) as against the standards of kings and temples. In the Middle Assyrian period the standard for capacity measures was kept in the *bīt ḫiburni ša ekalli* (see CAD *ḫiburnu* in *bīt ḫiburni*).

with a meeting place for an assembly, for litigation, for civic spectacles or whatever purpose. Moreover, the city does not build its own temple such as was the pride of the Greek city that built temples with its own money ¹).

In these four points I have tried to block out, roughly, the main areas of divergence between Mesopotamian and Western urbanism. How can one utilize such comparisons in a search for a possible explanation, i.e., for a "theory" that will enable us to fit the listed deviations into a meaningful pattern?

The Mesopotamian city can best be explained if one assumes that it shows, to a considerable extent, the spirit of a merchant settlement. Merchants are sure to differ with regard to their personal financial means, but they are bound to have essentially the same social status. Merchants have no interest in military prowess nor even in self-defense, preferring to rely on others for such services. This explains also why there is no need for an architecturally separated and accentuated meeting place in a Mesopotamian city; the merchants are wont to meet in the harbor, the *karu*, the *domus mercatorum*. This "harbor" forms therefore an essential part of the Mesopotamian urban agglomeration—even the Sumerian texts tell us that a "city" consists of city, suburb and harbor. In the latter the overland trade reaches the city but does not cross its walls. In the "harbor" the city merchants come into contact with the foreign traders; caravans and boats come and go. The *karu* is at the same time the seat of the authority constituted by the merchants

1) I would like to draw attention to another observation concerning differences between Mesopotamian and Western cities. In the Old Babylonian omen texts, one can hardly detect any traces of tensions between citizens. This is in patent contrast to the Greek *polis* where the spirit of *agon*, the vying for personal excellence, counter-balances rather ineffectually a deep and characteristic yearning for supreme power (tyrannis as greatest sin and greatest pleasure—Solon) which perturbs again and again the precarious civic equilibrium constantly jeopardized by class and status differences. The main calamities foreseen in the apodoses of the omens concern wealth and poverty but this instability of fortune is apparently accepted in the spirit of overland merchants aware of their tremendous risks. Sudden changes seem to have had little effect on the Mesopotamian city dwellers. In contrast with the situation in Greece, there is no trace of prejudices against non-inherited wealth.

themselves, in which their activities are regulated by collegia constantly in session.

This syndrome of features: lack of status stratification, no military interest, self-rule, etc., has left its mark on the Mesopotamian city; the range of interest of its citizens always stayed within these limitations.

The Mesopotamian city is certainly the result of a long and complex development; two of its outstanding features attest to that: the manorial organization of the temple and that of the palace. Apart from these organizations and whatever fringe groups had become attached to them and lived within the city ¹⁾, the *mārē āli*, "citizens," however thin this stratum may have been, seems to have been formed by moneyed people who invested their wealth either in arable land or in mercantile overland trade ventures. The reasons why the moneyed people moved into the confines of the city walls can, of course, only be guessed at. Perhaps the kings originally attracted them by granting special privileges, perhaps at times the risks involved in trade became, for some, too high, and the possibility of investing money in land and raising cereals for an export market offered more advantages, or perhaps the emotional relationship to money and money-making changed; possibly living on investments made with inherited wealth became more acceptable than active participation in trade and living in the *karu* teeming with foreigners, etc. Their relationship to the traders of the *karu* remains a problem. One could state it, perhaps too pointedly, by saying that the merchant made his money in the *karu* to live on his capital inside the city, although, as the archives from Sippar indicate, there is a definite separation between city and *karu*. The relationship between city

1) The role and organization of the troops garrisoned in Sippar and their contacts with the citizens have likewise been illuminated by the Sippar Project. The relationship between any city and the soldiery stationed in it varies, of course, from the capital down to the frontier outpost of purely military importance. The degree to which aliens were admitted to live within the city limits either permanently or temporarily is difficult to state specifically for given periods and localities. Cf. the remarks in my *Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 78 f., 81 and 116. For the incorporation of "camps" of nomadic tribes into the city of Sippar, evidence will be presented in the publication by Mrs. Harris. In this respect—and in several others—Sippar presents an atypical arrangement of a Mesopotamian city.

and “harbor” in terms of economic and social contacts could be established only on the basis of prosopographic investigations for which there is no material at hand, even from Sippar¹). At any rate, the inhabitants of the walled city show very much the outlook and the preferences one expects in the harbor community, such as self-rule and aversion to military and similar obligations, all—by the way—typical of a middle-class world view.

This does not mean that the Mesopotamian city, Sippar in particular, had no civic structure or was solely inhabited by merchants. We have enough evidence in the material collected by Dr. Harris to obtain a picture, although blurred and deficient in many essential respects, of the workings of the city’s administration, such as the “assembly” (*ālum*, rarely *pubrum*) and the “standing committees” (*dajānū*), etc. But this is outside the scope of the present paper and will be dealt with by Dr. Harris. I would like to stress, moreover, that there is also evidence for urban heterogeneity which is a characteristic feature of city living anywhere and everywhere. Its extent remains, however, very difficult to ascertain. For one, we do not know to what degree all those individuals attached to either temple or palace derived part of or their entire income from these institutions, what variations existed between, on one hand, full time application to such duties and, on the other, solely status privileges based on some form of connection with them. Neither have we any means of establishing how and to what degree new arrivals were incorporated into the body of the population. Among certain restrictive influences on big city heterogeneity is, as the most noteworthy, the minimal role played by an urban proletariat consisting of poor craftsmen, persons living from their own labor. This cannot be attributed entirely to the lack of pertinent documentation, because literary and omen texts would contain mention of such a class if it had

1) The “harbor” section of the city of Sippar has not been found. The letter published by W. F. Leemans in his *Foreign Trade in the Old Babylonian Period* (Leiden 1960) p. 106, was written in the settlement of Sippar traders in Mari and Mišlan. The fact that this letter was excavated in Tell ed-Deir, a part of the Sippar site, seems to suggest that this tell was located on or near the *karu*. However, the tablets of this provenience to be published by D. Edzard, do not seem to bear this out.

been within the horizon of the reader of these texts. There are several factors which might have contributed to the situation: aside from the mentioned organizations (temple and palace), there was no industrial production—such as we encounter in Western cities—based on slave labor (later, cheap labor) and stimulated and directed by entrepreneurs. The absence of markets for food and dry goods which would create work for craftsmen and opportunities for self-supporting strata of the population should also be mentioned here. One has, furthermore, to keep in mind that free artisans and skilled workers are very likely to have been swallowed up (especially in hard times) by the economically powerful manorial organizations, both of which must also have absorbed an appreciable number of the very poor who were able to do manual labor.

Since in the preceding pages reference has repeatedly been made to temple and palace, one should at least mention the relationship of these organizations to the inhabitants of the city. However important might be the sanctuary of the city's god or gods, its political fame, its theological elaborations, no pattern of influence on the city as a body politic can be discerned ¹⁾. The absence of a clergy ready and eager to increase its influence and wealth as well as the lack of groups of devotees with strong religious motivations in their social and economic behavior may at least partly account for the vacuum which separates city and temple. More deeply rooted reasons, probably connected with the prehistory of both institutions, remain too speculative to be mentioned here. As to the palace, in Mesopotamia the king's image is consistently beclouded by the effervescent wording of all royal utterances, dominated by the native tradition of kingship, its claims and prerogatives. A point could be made that the king is basically, though nowhere admittedly, a war lord ²⁾ whose political and military base of power is in small

1) Mesopotamian religion as such shows hardly any features traceable to such early, mesolithic practices as shamanism, nor does it exhibit any clear dependency on the fertility complex of the neolithic village. It represents the result of an entirely different development which one should compare with parallel lines of evolution in other high civilizations.

2) This has already been stated, though for quite different reasons, by Th. Jacobsen. in ZA 52 (1957) p. 124 ff.

towns and other settlements rather than in the city in which he has his palace. He derives status and influence from the size and strength of his own household and from his relationship to the sanctuary, as well as from the political rank of his capital. He rules without a council of experts¹⁾, hence, without much bureaucracy, concentrating executive power in his own person and in his personal servants. He acts as law-giver and dispenses social justice mainly to the countryside and its inhabitants. The king must, however, come to terms with the moneyed city-dwellers because it is the cities and the temples that yield him tax income in silver while the rural regions deliver, at best, in-kind payments. The latter furnish him also soldiers or mercenaries as well as corvée workers. He needs both for warfare and for internal colonization projects devised to enlarge the sedentary segments of the population. One could even say that with his person the king of a Mesopotamian city-state linked city and countryside, the former giving him political and religious status, the latter, the means for waging wars to obtain additional power by conquest and booty.

The investigation of the position of the free citizens of a Babylonian city—see above page 4—has shown the existence and the influence of but a small layer of persons living in such cities on their own financial resources, outside the hierarchic closed-circuit systems of palace and temple though, as it is necessary for merchants, in a smooth-working, utilitarian relationship to them. Are these then the carriers of the Mesopotamian cultural tradition or are they as alien to its intellectual and artistic core as the slaves, serfs and administrators mentioned at

1) This is in contrast to Egypt, whose king is surrounded by administrative experts. Even in the one instance in which we are informed about the officials at court, the "*Hofkalender*" of Nebuchadnezzar II (see Unger *Babylon* 282 ff. and my translation in ANET² 307 f.), we find mostly officials concerned with the royal household (harem, slave girls, workmen, singers, sailors and cattle) and governors of provinces as well as other local officials. The exception is perhaps only an apparent one: the chief of the sailors and that of the royal merchants, because it is quite likely that overland trade was a royal privilege. It should, however, be noted that the Old Babylonian omen texts repeatedly refer to "elders" (*šibūtu*) who advise (*malāku*, *milku*) the king. I have not been able to find any important text passages in support of this practice.

the beginning of this paper? Or do we have to assume that temple and palace as such, acting through the intermediary of a nucleus of learned scribes, were the sole carriers of these traditions, not only in the essential role of preserving and periodically re-vitalizing them, but also in their creative phase?

I have no ready answer to such a question, but I think that some thought should be given to the following possibility: the existence of an intelligentsia attached in some way to the higher cadres of the manorial organizations and consisting of scribes versed in the highest levels of their craft, experts in theurgy and divination, practitioners in medicine, mathematics, etc. An intelligentsia in such a position and of such status must have a relationship with the hierarchies quite different from that between them and their workers or even their top administrators. Poets, scholars and professional men in Mesopotamia thus could have belonged to the same milieu as did the highly skilled artisans (I avoid the modern term "artists") and craftsmen. They all were attracted to the manors by the economic security and artistic and scholarly opportunities granted them there, and must have enjoyed a special relationship due to their potential mobility since they could sell their services to either of these organizations, or to the rich citizens. In this way the city could well have fostered and encouraged to a certain degree the development of the arts and the intellectual activities and have lessened the hold which the organizations of palace and temple are bound to have had on the specialists, the carriers of the artistic and intellectual traditions of the civilization. In this manner, the moneyed citizens assume again a role in keeping with their middle-class world view to which I have referred above.

However tenuous these suggested explanations might appear to the Assyriologist happy within the confines of philological and other segmental interests, the problems I have singled out demand the attention of anyone interested in Mesopotamia. That no definite solutions can as yet be offered—and, most likely, none will ever be found—does not make these problems less interesting or less important. I have been first of all interested in sketching a conceptual model for the

social structure of Mesopotamia which even in the rather arbitrary confines of this paper appears as complex as befits a high civilization. It is woefully incomplete because all these cities are embedded in an expanse of open country with a history of its own; its villages, fortified garrisons, fertile stretches along newly dug canals, deserts, pasture grounds, tribal land, all have left us hardly any documentation and very little archeological evidence. And yet, the open country was at all times and in all regions as important in the political picture as the city and the king; but its role in the development of Mesopotamian cultural and social traditions is and most likely will remain in the dark.